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ABSTRACT

Research on the effects of divorce has generally focused on mothers and children, neglecting the father. This study examined post-divorce problems in divorced custodial fathers (N=20), divorced noncustodial fathers (N=20), and divorced childless men (N=20). The three groups and a group of married fathers (N=20) were compared on a measure of morale and a measure of psychological adjustment. Multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated significant overall differences (p .05) among the three divorced groups on post-divorce problems. Analysis of variance and individual comparison techniques revealed, as expected, that both custodial and noncustodial divorced fathers reported significantly more parent-child concerns than divorced childless men (p .05), but that there was no significant difference between the custodial and noncustodial divorced fathers. Divorced custodial fathers reported more practical problems (housekeeping, cooking, time management) than did divorced childless men (p .05), while divorced noncustodial fathers did not differ significantly from the other two groups. The findings on post-divorce problems suggest that noncustodial fathers may be in need of interventions similar to those developed for custodial fathers. (36 references) (NB)

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A COMPARISON OF PROBLEMS AND ADJUSTMENT OF DIVORCED CUSTODIAL FATHERS, DIVORCED NONCUSTODIAL FATHERS, AND DIVORCED CHILDLESS MEN

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Running Head: MEN'S DIVORCE ADJUSTMENT

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Abstract

Divorced custodial fathers (n=20), divorced noncustodial fathers (n=20), and divorced childless men (n=20) were compared on a six factor measure of post-divorce problems. The three groups and a group of married fathers (n=20) were compared on a measure of morale and a measure of psychological adjustment. Multivariate analysis of variance demonstrated significant overall differences ($P < .05$) between the three divorced groups on post-divorce problems. Analysis of variance and individual comparison techniques which followed revealed, as expected, that both custodial and non-custodial divorced fathers reported significantly more parent-child concerns than divorced childless men ($p < .05$), but that there was no significant difference between the custodial and noncustodial divorced fathers. Divorced custodial fathers reported more practical problems than did divorced childless men ($p < .05$), while divorced noncustodial fathers did not differ significantly from the other two groups. The findings on post-divorce problems suggest that noncustodial fathers may be in need of interventions similar to those developed for custodial fathers. Recommendations concerning clinical use as well as suggestions for further research are offered.

A Comparison of Problems and Adjustment of Divorced Custodial Fathers, Divorced Noncustodial Fathers, and Divorced Childless Men

In the past two decades the rate of divorce in the United States has risen dramatically. The yearly marriage rate has remained relatively stable with a rate of 9.3 marriages per 1,000 population in 1965 and a rate of 10.4 marriages per 1,000 population in 1983. However, the divorce rate has risen from 2.5 per 1,000 population in 1965 to 4.9 per 1,000 population in 1983 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987). In 1983 there were 2,446,000 marriages and 1,158,000 divorces in the United States with 1,090,000 children affected (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1987).

It has been estimated that if the current divorce rate stabilizes at its present level, 40 to 50% of the children born in the seventies will spend some time living in a single parent home (Moreland & Schwebel, 1981). In 1980, over 8 million children were living only with their mothers as a result of divorce or separation in a total of 4,386,000 female headed households (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981). Thus an estimate of the number of divorced, non-custodial fathers could be made of at least 4,000,000. Additionally in 1981 there were 835,000 children living only with their father as a result of divorce or separation (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1981).

Not surprisingly, this increase in divorce has altered family structure.

Although several sources point out that divorce can be a growth producing and ultimately positive experience (Hardy & Cull, 1974; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Hunt & Hunt, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980), the divorce experience is nearly always reported as bringing feelings of pain, loss, anger, and depression, and is perceived as a stressful event (Weiss, 1975). In their survey of major life events, Holmes and Rahe (1967) found divorce to be considered the second most stressful life event behind only the death of a spouse.

As pointed out by Bloom, Asher, and White (1978) in their review of marital disruption as a stressor, marital separation and divorce have been associated with a wide variety of physical and mental health disturbances . Divorced persons are repeatedly found to be overrepresented among psychiatric patients, with divorced males having higher admission rates than divorced females; divorced persons have a motor vehicle accident rate three times that of married persons. Finally, divorced persons generally are found to have higher rates of physical illness and disability, alcoholism, suicide, death by homicide, and death by illness. The emotional reactions to divorce include anxiety, depression, anger, feelings of rejection, feelings of incompetence, and lowered self-concept (Berman & Turk, 1981; Gray, 1978; Keshet & Rosenthal, 1978)

Various studies of children's reactions to divorce (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; McDermott, 1968; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980) indicate that most children experience stress when their parents divorce.

The research on the effects of divorce, while focusing on mothers, and children in general, has neglected the father- especially the father who does not receive custody of his children after the divorce Both males and females feel the need to understand the impact of divorce on adults and children and would like to learn effective child rearing methods However, males experience a higher degree of stress due to the smaller number of support systems available for men (Tedder, Scherman & Sheridan, 1984). Several writers have commented that the father has been largely ignored in both the research on the effects of divorce on family members (Grief, 1979; Jacobs, 1982; Roman & Haddad, 1978; Rosenthal & Keshet, 1981), and in most other investigations of family life (Biller & Meredith, 1974; Grief, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Lamb, 1976). The popular image of the divorced man seems to be that of the carefree (or even careless) newly freed man setting up a "bachelor pad" from which to launch an exciting new social life (Grief, 1979). It is assumed he will send child support, visit his children somewhat regularly, at least at first, but will soon visit less often and perhaps even completely cease visitation. It would appear that courts assume that financial support is the

primary function of divorced fathers since the typical custody agreement gives the mother custody and the father child support obligations and visitation every (or every other) weekend (Roman & Haddad, 1978). However, recent research strongly indicates that many divorced fathers value their role as a parent and find it rewarding, satisfying, and a source of pride and self-esteem (Grief, 1979; Hetherington et al., 1976, Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1989). According to Stewart, Schwebel and Fine (1986), custodial fathers rated their parent-child relationship as better and the communication among them and their children as more positive than did non-custodial fathers.

If divorced fathers choose to maintain their parental role, what stressors are created by their assumption of child care? Do they experience different stresses than do married fathers or divorced men with no children? Further, what are the effects of assuming responsibility for child care on divorce adjustment? Do divorced fathers evidence greater difficulty adjusting to divorce than do childless divorced males? The present study addresses these issues of stress and fathering.

Method

Participants

Four groups of 20 men in each group participated in this study. These men were recruited through divorce support groups, divorce counseling agencies, newspaper ads, and through individuals having

knowledge of potential participants in four southern states. The four groups were: (1) Married fathers (MF); (2) Divorced childless males (DC); (3) Divorced custodial fathers (CF); and (4) Divorced non-custodial fathers (NF).

The four groups did not differ significantly on age, years of education, income level category and number of children. However, significant differences were found in length of years married and in average age of children. The racial composition was overwhelmingly white in all four groups, ranging from 90% for the divorced childless group to 100% for the divorced custodial group.

Instrumentation

Four instruments were used to assess problems and adjustments:

1. Demographic Questionnaire - The instrument contained general demographic items (age, education level, ethnic background,income level, etc.) as well as divorce and fatherhood specific questions (length of marriage, time divorced, custody status, number and age of children, etc.)

2. Checklist of Problems and Concerns (Berman & Turk, 1981) - This is a 35-item questionnaire designed to assess the nature of problems encountered during the process of divorce. Subjects are asked to rate the frequency of occurrence of a problem on a four-point scale: never, sometimes, often, always. The authors report that factor analysis of the instrument yielded six orthogonal factors that had eigenvalues greater than 1.0 and were easily interpretable.

These factors were Former Spouse Contacts, Parent-child Interactions, Interpersonal Relations, Loneliness, Practical Problems, and Financial Concerns. The internal consistency of these factors, as determined by Cronbach's alpha ranged from .66 to .84. The authors demonstrated validity of the scale by obtaining a multiple R = .42 between three of the factors (Interpersonal Relations, Former Spouse Contacts, and Parent-Child Interactions) and a measure of current mood, and a multiple R=.45 between three factors (Interpersonal Relations, Practical Problems, and Financial Concerns), and a measure of current life satisfaction.

3. The Bradburn Morale Scale (Bradburn & Caplowitz, 1967) - This instrument consists of nine statements about feelings to which the subject responds on a four point scale: not at all, once, several times, often. It yields two subscales: (1) positive emotions, and (2) negative emotions. The authors report that specific items in the positive cluster are not highly correlated with items from the negative cluster (range -.19 to +.11) and that total scores on the two subscales are uncorrelated (r=.07). However, each scale correlates in the expected direction: the negative scale correlates with indices of anxiety, maladjustment in job and marital roles, while the positive scale correlates with social interaction and with self reports of happiness. Additionally, Kanner, Coyne, Schaefer, and Lazarus (1981) found that the average monthly correlation between the positive scale and a measure of "uplifting" daily events was

significant (r=.22, P=<0.05) and that the average monthly correlation between the negative scale and a measure of "hassles" was also significant (r=.34, P=<0.001).

4. The Symptom Distress Checklist (SCL-90; Derogatis, Lipman, & Covi, 1973) - The SCL-90 is a 90 item self-report instrument in which respondents rate the degree of distress that specific psychological symptoms have caused in the past week on a five point scale: not at all, a little bit, moderately, quite a bit, extremely. The SCL-90 assesses psychological symptoms on nine primary dimensions: (1) somatization, (2) Obsessive-Compulsive, (3) Interpersonal Sensitivity, (4) Depression, (5) Anxiety, (6) Hostility, (7) Phobic Anxiety, (8) Paranoid Ideation, and (9) Psychoticism. Although it is an experimental scale it is an extension of the Hopkins Symptom Checklist (HSCL) (Derogatis, Lipman, Covi, Rickles, & Uhlenhuth, 1970; Derogatis, Lipman, Covi, & Rickles, 1971; Derogatis, Lipman, Rickles, Ulenhugh, & Covi, 1974), a 58 item self-report instrument that assesses psychological symptoms on the first five of the SCL-90 dimensions. Norms for the HSCL are available for non-clinical populations (Derogatis et al., 1974), and it has been found to be sensitive to low levels of symptoms in normal populations (Rickles, Lipman, Garcia, & Fisher, 1972; Uhlenhuth et al., 1974). Kanner et al. (1981) used the HSCL as an indicator of stress levels in a normal population, finding a significant correlation between frequency of day-to-day problems

and HSCL symptoms over a 10 month period ($r=.49$, $p=<0.001$). Derogatis (1977) reports that test-retest reliabilities for the nine factors of the SCL-90 range from .78 to .90, and that internal consistency coefficients of the nine factors range from .83 to .90. Additionally, norms for the SCL on a non-clinical population are reported.

The married fathers did not complete the Checklist of Problems and Concerns because it was not appropriately worded for married subjects, while the remaining groups completed all four instruments.

Procedure

The researchers made contact with potential participants either by telephone or in person. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, and they were asked to sign an agreement to participate form, take the instruments and return the materials as soon as possible.

Results

The data from the Checklist of Problems and Concerns (CPC) were analyzed using a multivariate analysis of variance, with parental/custodial status (the three divorced groups only) as the independent variable and the six subscales of the CPC as dependent variables. A significant effect for parental/custodial status was

obtained (Wilk's criterion = .52, F(12, 104) = 3.33, p=<.001). Table 1 presents the results of a univariate analysis of variance computed on each of the dependent variables to determine which of these contributed to the significant main effect.

Insert Table 1 about here

Significant effects for parental/custodial status were obtained for two dependent variables, Parent-Child Interactions and Practical Problems, while effects of the remaining four variables of the CPC were not significant. Finally, Scheffe's post hoc procedure at the .05 level of significance was applied to determine which groups differed on the two significant CPC variables. This analysis revealed that the divorced childless males reported significantly fewer parent-child problems than either group of divorced fathers, and significantly fewer practical problems than the custodial fathers. Note that custodial and non-custodial fathers did not differ on practical problems.

The data from the Bradburn Morale Scale and the Symptom Distress Checklist (SCL-90) were also analyzed by a multivariate analysis of variance technique. The independent variable was marital/parental/custodial status and the dependent variables were the 2 subscales of the Bradburn Morale Scale and 9 subscales of the SCL-90. The effect for marital/parental/custodial status was not

found to be significant (Wilk's criterion = .54, F (33, 195.15) = 1.37, p=<.10) so further statistical analysis was not conducted. However, inspection of group means on the Bradburn Morale Scale and the SCL-90 nevertheless suggests a trend. On 9 of the 11 variables the divorced childless group indicated the highest level of difficulty; and on 7 of the 11, the married fathers indicated the lowest level of problems in adjustment.

Discussion

Custodial and non-custodial fathers reported more concern with practical problems (housekeeping, cooking, time management) on the Checklist of Problems and Concerns than did divorced childless men. Divorced non-custodial fathers did not differ significantly from the custodial fathers' groups. These results have several potential explanations. One is simply a common sense conclusion that men who assume single parent responsibility or part time responsibilty for their children will encounter greater numbers of problems than will men who have no child care duties. A related, yet somewhat different explanation would be that custodial fathers have a heightened awareness of housekeeping and cooking because of its impact on their children. This explanation appears to agree with the observation of Keshet and Rosenthal (1978) that it is often the desire to provide adequate arrangements for child care that motivates divorced men to establish stable living arrangements and lifestyles.

The finding of statistically significant differences between the three divorced groups on the Parent-Child concerns factor of the CPS requires some analysis. The difference was between the childless group and the two divorced father groups with the childless group reporting fewer problems. It appears reasonable to assume that the childless group has fewer contacts with children, and that those contacts are with children they have little responsibility toward (such as nieces, nephews, children of friends). In this study, divorced custodial fathers and non-custodial fathers are reporting no differences in the frequency of parent-child concerns, in apparent contradiction to the findings of Stewart, Schwebel, and Fine (1986) who found custodial fathers rated their parent-child relationships as more positive and with better communication than did non-custodial fathers. One explanation for this apparent discrepancy is that the present study assessed frequency of problems in maintaining parent-child relationships rather than the quality of those relationships. An alternate hypothesis is that the two studies involved different populations of divorce fathers. Stewart et al. (1986) found differences between custodial and non-custodial fathers not only on quality of parent-child interactions but on measures of self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and general adjustment while the present study found no differences between custodial and non-custodial fathers on measures of problems faced or adjustment. Both the Steward et al.

(1986) and the present study found essentially no differences between custodial fathers and married fathers on adjustment.

One important implication of the finding in this study of no difference between custodial and non-custodial fathers on any variable of the Checklist of Problems and Concerns is that the kinds of interventions developed for custodial fathers (Tedder, et al., 1981; Tedder, et al., 1984) addressing such issues as child care, homemaking skills, and social isolation may be appropriate for non-custodial fathers as well. The findings also suggest that helping professionals assisting the non-custodial father should address these issues as possible need areas when working with noncustodial fathers.

The findings of this study do not support a conclusion of overall differences in adjustment between married fathers, divorced childless men, divorced custodial fathers, and non-custodial fathers, in apparent contradiction to the trend of previous research (Bloom et al., 1978). Several explanations appear plausible. It may be that the stigma traditionally associated with divorce has been reduced due to increased occurrence of divorce, the publicity surrounding this increase, and the greater availability of social support (often through groups) for divorced individuals. It may also be that the married subjects were experiencing atypically high stress levels. A potential source of such stress would be economic pressures. Most of the subjects were recruited from states highly dependent on the

petroleum industry which was experiencing a serious decline at the time of data collection. While undoubtedly the divorced men were also subject to these pressures, it is possible the stress was more severe for the married fathers who may have felt economically responsible for their wives as well as their children. A second potential source of increased stress for the married subjects is the changing nature of marital and sex roles, which may result in increased home responsibilities for married men in areas such as child care and household chores.

One plausible explanation for the absence in this study of significant differences in adjustment specifically between custodial and non-custodial fathers is that amount of time together or quality of the relationship, rather than legal status of the relationship are more salient variables. Despite the legal status, a wide continuum of quality and quantity of post-divorce father-child relationships appears possible (Ahrons, 1980; Kanoy, Cunningham, White, & Adams, 1984; Stewart et al., 1986), and it may be that the post-divorce father-child relationship is not highly correlated with custodial status.

The nonsignificant trend observed in the results suggests that divorced childless men may have greater difficulty with post-divorce adjustment. Although this conclusion is clearly speculative, it is nevertheless interesting to relate this suggestion to the findings of Stewart et al. (1986) who found poorer adjustment in

non-custodial fathers than in custodial or married fathers and argued that the presence of children is ". . . a facilitative, stabilizing factor in post-divorce adjustment for men" (pg. 55). However, it appears that Stewart et al. (1986), who did not include childless divorced men in their study, may have overstated their conclusion regarding the mediating effects of children. A more defendable conclusion would be that the maintenance of a preexisting parent-child relationship is a mediating factor. If the trend of poorer adjustment in divorced childless men in this study had been significant, it would have suggested that the presence of children are a mediating factor in divorce adjustment for men. This suggests that further investigation of divorced men's relationships in relation to adjustment may be extremely valuable. One specific question would be whether involvement in any close relationship (such as between siblings or parents, friends, or romantic partners) mediates adjustment or is the existence of a nurturing relationship (such as the divorced father with his children) the mediating factor.

Another potentially fruitful suggestion for further research concerning post-divorce adjustment of fathers is to study adjustment as a function of either the amount of time fathers spent with their children or the quality of the relationship. Additionally, a comparison of custodial, noncustodial, and joint custodial fathers could also shed light on the relationship of post-divorce fathering to adjustment. Longitudinal studies, ideally including pre-divorce

assessment, but certainly including multiple measurements over time post-divorce, could significantly increase understanding of the dynamic nature of post-divorce adjustment.

There are difficulties in researching an area as complex and dynamic as divorce. The sheer numbers of divorced men as well as the pervasiveness of the life changes these men face appear as strong calls for providing mental health support services for this population. It also calls on the social sciences to increase knowledge of a currently inadequately understood process of divorce adjustment for this understudied group.

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Table 1

Comparisons of Means on Checklist of Problems and Concerns

Variable	Group: Divorced Childless	Divorced Custodial Fathers	Divorced Non-Custodial Fathers	ANOVA Results
Former Spouse Contacts	6.65 SD = 2.23	9.15 SD = 4.16	8.55 SD = 3.76	df 2,57 F = 2.81
Parent-child Interactions	5.20a SD = 1.40	8.55b SD = 2.78	8.00b SD = 3.29	df 2,57 F = 9.43*
Interpersonal Relations	9.75 SD = 3.24	7.50 SD = 2.56	8.25 SD = 3.92	df 2,57 F = 2.43
Loneliness	10.85 SD = 2.52	9.85 SD = 2.56	9.80 SD = 4.35	df 2,57 F = 0.66
Practical Problems	7.35a SD = 2.21	10.40b SD = 2.56	9.00 SD = 3.64	df 2,57 F = 5.66*
Financial Concerns	4.20 SD = 1.54	4.60 SD = 1.31	4.50 SD = 2.04	df 2,57 F = 0.32

*$p < .05$. Means with different subscripts (a, b) differ significantly at $p < .05$.